

It may come as a surprise to discover that Rwanda is recognised to be one of the safest nations in Africa. In the two decades since the strife-ridden mid-1990s, Rwandans have got up, dusted themselves off and, under determined leadership, transformed their home into a well-run republic. Environmental conservationist **Stephen Cunliffe** emerged from its densely populated capital Kigali to visit Akagera National Park, and discovered a tranquil green haven.

TEXT BY STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

As we trundled across the Kilala Plains in second gear, the sea of animals parted ahead of us, enabling our vehicle to carve a narrow corridor through the herds. We were slap bang in the middle of a proverbial 'land of plenty', where the concentrations of wildlife defied belief and far exceeded my expectations. To witness the scene was a rare privilege.

Amazingly, we weren't in the Masai Mara-Serengeti ecosystem watching the annual wildebeest migration. We were, in fact, in the most unlikely of places – a little-known gem in north-eastern Rwanda called Akagera National Park.

Our Akagera adventure had actually begun three days earlier when we entered the park through its main gate in the south. We saw many animals as we explored this section of Rwanda's only protected savanna ecosystem, but it was the diverse terrain that really impressed me. An archetypal African landscape of acacia woodlands and rolling grassy hills in the west gave way to a labyrinth of lakes, wetlands and papyrus-dominated swamps along the meandering Akagera River in the east. Later I learnt that this watery wilderness, which covers a third of the park's surface area, constitutes the only protected wetland system in all Central-East Africa.

Akagera's greatest appeal is arguably to birdlovers. It is a true birdwatchers' paradise, with a staggering 530 species, including the endemic papyrus gonolek and the singular shoebill, recorded within the sanctuary (see page 62). Having recently acquired two new boats, the park offers guests the chance to explore Lake Ihema, so I decided to venture onto the water to sample Akagera's birding first-hand.

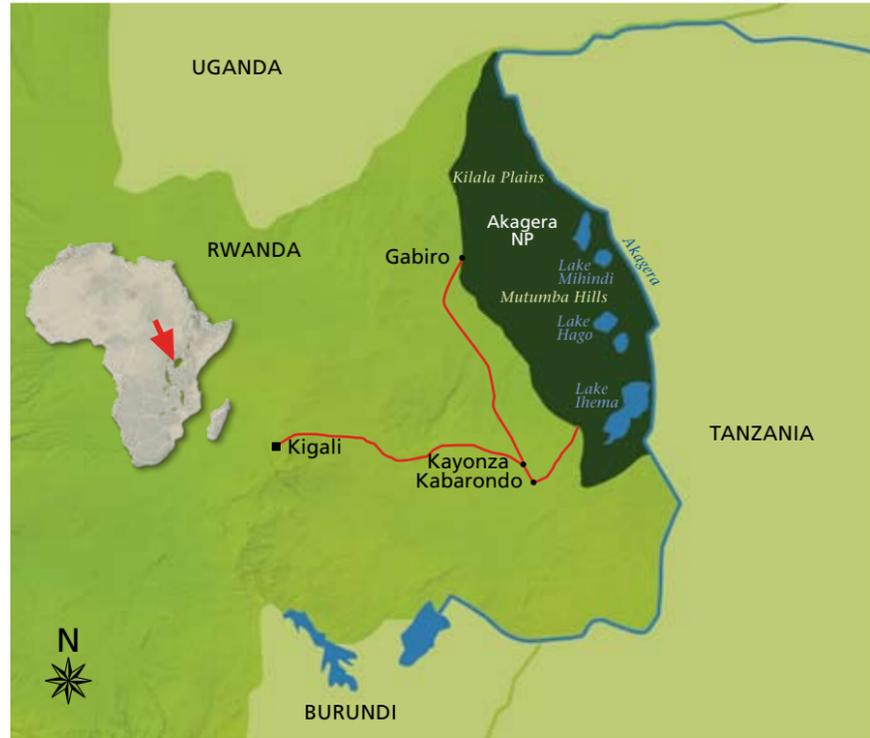
Although I wasn't fortunate enough to glimpse any of the small population of resident shoebills, the cruise around the lakes and waterways of the eastern sector ►

breathing deeply

IN RWANDA

BRYAN HAVEMANN

AKAGERA



provided an enchanting introduction to the wonders of the Rwandan wilderness. Hippos grunted and spluttered around the boat and gigantic crocodiles soaked up the sun on the banks, their vast jaws menacingly agape. As we chugged peacefully along, I was captivated by the impressively dense concentrations of waterbirds that peppered the shoreline. An abundance of pelicans, crowned cranes, storks, herons, egrets and kingfishers rubbed feathers in what is, after Nyungwe Forest to the south-west, the country's second-most important ornithological site. When the distinctive call of the fish eagle echoed across the lake, it completed a quintessentially African scene.

After World War I, Rwanda was placed in the charge of Belgium, whose conservation-conscious officials proclaimed the Parc National de l'Akagera in 1934. Renamed Akagera National Park after independence in 1962, the 112 000-hectare reserve contains staggering numbers of wildlife species.

Healthy populations of hippos, sitatunga, Defassa waterbuck and waterfowl thrive in its well-watered eastern region, while the typically East African grasslands and mixed woodlands in the west offer refuge to giraffes, buffaloes, zebras, impala and diminutive oribi. Until recently Akagera was Rwanda's only surviving Big Five sanctuary, but, sadly, heavy poaching and relentless persecution by local cattle herders has eradicated the black rhino and driven the last lions across the border into Uganda and Tanzania. Consequently, leopards, spotted hyaenas and crocodiles have become the park's primary predators.

About a decade ago, Akagera was three times its current size. When, in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide, tens of thousands of refugees streamed back into Rwanda bringing with them large numbers of cattle, the government was impelled to find a place to accommodate them. In 1998 a decision was made to de-proclaim two-thirds of the park. Huge tracts of prime habitat were lost to grazing land for the livestock, although, thankfully, the most attractive areas were spared and are still protected.

A major problem with the re-gazetting of the reserve was that nobody had thought to inform the wildlife that their territories and home ranges had been re-assigned to people and livestock. With cattle entering the park to graze and drink and wild animals straying onto new farmlands, conflict was inevitable.irate villagers poisoned livestock carcasses with devastating effect on predator populations. Crop-raiding buffaloes and marauding elephants were ruthlessly dealt with by the military. Inevitably, as hostilities heightened, it was the wildlife that came off second best and Akagera's future appeared increasingly bleak – until December 2009, when the African Parks Network (APN) stepped into the fray.

I tracked down Bryan Havemann, the recently appointed APN project manager for Akagera, and asked him what he thought about the government's decision to sacrifice so much of the original park. 'The original Akagera was a remarkable, self-contained ecosystem, but [through] de-gazetting we lost much of the lush central valley and prime grazing areas ... the smaller park cannot support the same numbers of wildlife,' he told me. 'However, it's a waste of time to reminisce about what has been lost. What we need to do is knuckle down and work with what is left, because the Akagera that remains is scenically



STEPHEN CUNLIFF

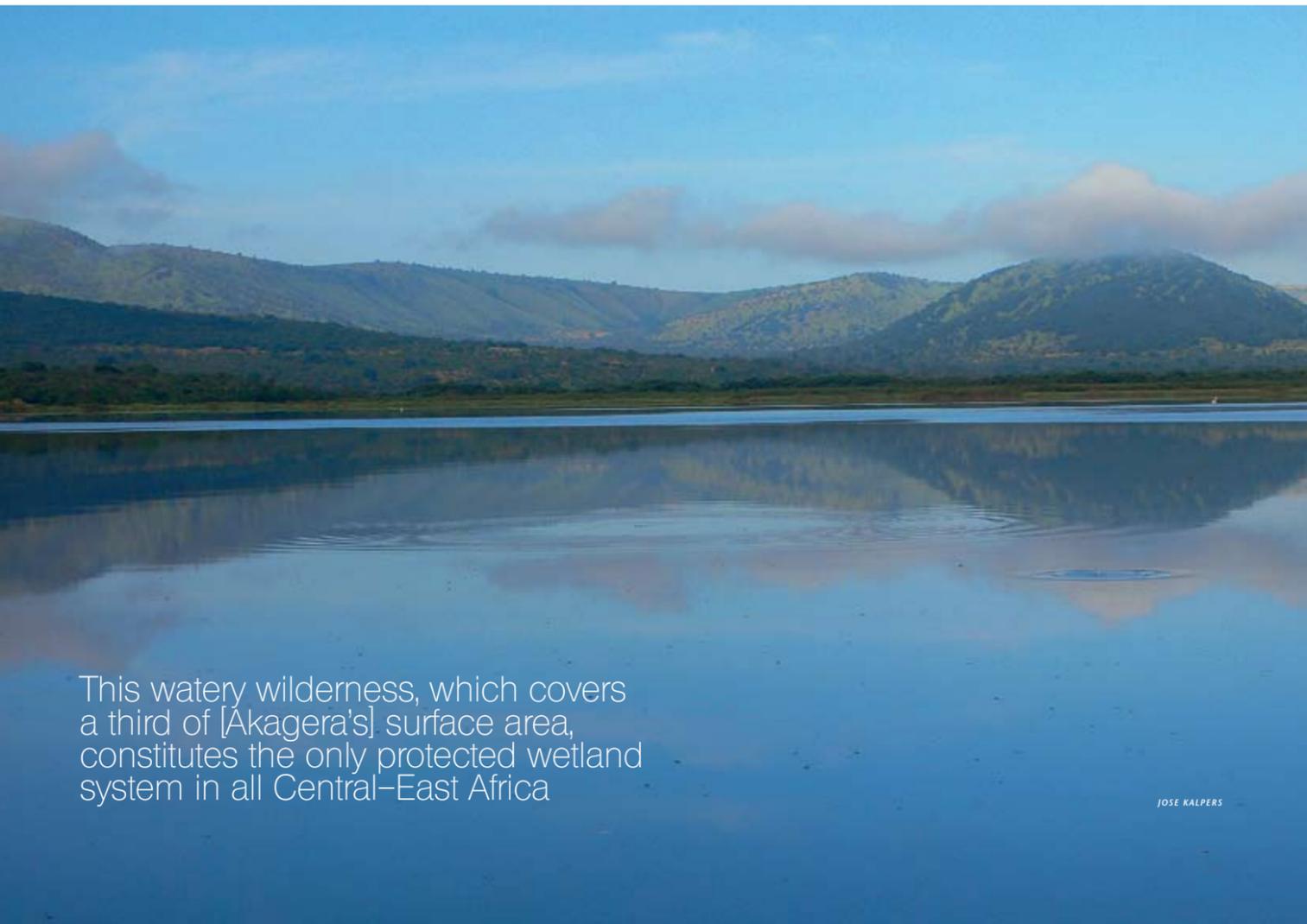
spectacular and has incredible potential. It's an absolute jewel.'

Havemann went on to explain that the APN's primary goal was to develop the conservation and tourism potential of the park for the benefit of all Rwandans. 'If the local communities don't support us,' he continued, 'then we're going to have a seriously difficult time here. African Parks won't be in Akagera forever. We are here to build local capacity, re-establish the full suite of biodiversity and ensure that, two decades from now, we hand over a sustainable and fully functioning [park].'

ABOVE The topi antelope, a grazer, thrives in the open savanna woodlands and grassy plains of western and northern Akagera.

OPPOSITE Lake Mihindi. The eastern section of the park consists of a series of pristine wetlands fed by the Akagera River.

PREVIOUS SPREAD The bronzed, elegant impala is a gregarious species that often forms herds of several hundred.



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JOSE KALPERS

AKAGERA

Using business models and public-private partnerships, the APN is a not-for-profit company committed to the conservation of Africa's parks and wildlife. After negotiating a 20-year management lease with the Rwanda Development Board (RDB), the APN took over full responsibility for the long-term management and rehabilitation of Akagera National Park in early 2010. The sanctuary will benefit from the APN's extensive technical and managerial expertise, especially in areas such as habitat management, infrastructure development, anti-poaching, game fencing, wildlife restocking, community conservation and tourism development. Despite the RDB's joint management agreement with the APN, Rwandans still retain full statutory authority over the national park.

With generous financial contributions from the philanthropic Walton Family Foundation and the RDB, plans are afoot to fence the western perimeter of Akagera, which should significantly reduce the incidence of illegal grazing and human-wildlife conflict in this populous region. The Warden for Law Enforcement, Charles Nsabimana, explained, 'The decision to erect an electric game-proof fence along the western boundary is a blessing for the local people. They can't quite believe it's actually happening.'

Another exciting development is that funds have been allocated to translocations as part of the rehabilitation programme; many of the existing antelope populations will be augmented with further introductions. Most excitingly, black rhinos and lions – which are considered key tourist drawcards – have been prioritised for reintroduction as soon as the new fence has been completed.

On the game-rich Kilala Plains, it seemed absurd to even suggest that there could be a shortage of animals in the park. Kilala, with its abundance of food and water, is a veritable Garden of Eden for the local wildlife. Its wide grassy plain and large shallow wetland are encircled by low hills. This distinctive topography and the massive concentrations of game give the place an uncanny resemblance to ▶

RIGHT A view across Lake Hago and the swamps towards the Tanzanian border.

RIGHT, ABOVE A flock of cattle egrets scatters above a breeding herd of buffaloes, watched by giraffes and topis on the game-rich Kilala Plains.

'On the Kilala Plains you just don't know which way to turn or where to look; there is too much going on in every direction'



STEPHEN CUNLIFFE



JOSE KALPERS

PACK YOUR BAGS

WHEN TO GO Wildlife viewing in Akagera National Park is best during the long dry season from late May to September, or during the short dry season in December and January. However, the views and landscapes are most spectacular during the wet season, when rain washes the dust and smoke from the air.

GETTING THERE Akagera is accessible throughout the year. From Kigali a two-hour drive along good paved roads brings you to the town of Kayonza. Head south to Kabarondo and follow a well-maintained dirt road for 30 kilometres to the main southern entrance gate to the park. This is the preferred route to Akagera Game Lodge and the park headquarters. Alternatively, head north to Gabiro and enter through Nyungwe Gate for access to the wildlife-rich Kilala Plains.

WHERE TO STAY Akagera Game Lodge, perched on a ridge overlooking Lake Ihema in the southern part of the reserve, is currently the only non-camping option. The lodge complex consists of 58 en-suite rooms, two executive rooms, eight family cottages, a swimming pool, tennis courts and a bar and large restaurant. Nature enthusiasts are not the only visitors; the lodge is the regular haunt of some of the most badly behaved olive baboons in Africa! More information and details about booking can be found at www.akageralodge.co.rw. The African Parks Network is planning to establish and operate a tented camp in Akagera; it is expected to be up and running later this year.

Akagera offers self-sufficient visitors the choice of three rustic campsites at Mutumba, Lake Shakani and Kayonza. Firewood, a rondavel shelter and long-drop toilets are provided, but no water is available at the sites. Plans are afoot to upgrade the facilities this year. Park-assigned guides are not mandatory, but their local knowledge is invaluable when exploring the area, as the roads are rough and signage poor.

WHAT TO DO Day and night-time game drives, boat cruises, fishing and birding safaris.

HEALTH AND SAFETY Rwanda is undoubtedly one of the safest, friendliest and most well-organised nations in Africa. However, one should always be vigilant and alert to petty theft in the bigger towns and market places. Akagera is in a malaria area, so consult your local doctor or travel clinic for prophylactics.

For further information, go to www.african-parks.org or www.rwandatourism.com/parks.htm



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SHOEBILL *Balaeniceps rex*

The most remarkable bird of Akagera's grass-fringed wetland channels is undoubtedly the shoebill. Not only does it have a newsworthy boot-shaped beak that grows to more than 20 centimetres, this large species would win an award for perseverance for its habit of standing in a waterway beneath the full sun for hours, waiting for its prey to swim past. On spotting it, the shoebill will dive into the water in a flash, emerging with its beak filled with vegetation, and its meal. These solitary birds can be seen flying high above the plains, and will visit further afield when rains flood the swamp.

Distribution Wetland regions of Sudan, Tanzania, Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda and Zambia, with smaller populations in Rwanda and south-western Ethiopia.

Height About 150 centimetres

Weight About six kilograms

Lifespan Up to 50 years

Habitat Swamps

Diet Fish (especially lungfish), baby crocodiles, toads

Breeding Generally monogamous. A mating pair construct a large nest on floating vegetation or an island, in which up to three eggs are laid. The shoebill will douse the eggs and chicks with water scooped up in its bill to prevent them overheating.

Call This generally quiet bird will clap its bill together when greeting its mate at the nest, producing a sound that resembles the clacking of castanets.

Status Vulnerable

Tanzania's Ngorongoro Crater. However, in sharp contrast to Ngorongoro, we encountered only one other car.

The ubiquitous topi and Bohor reed-buck mingled with herds of buffalo, eland and zebra. A stretch of Masai giraffe journeyed across the plain to take a drink, while a rambunctious young bull tried his utmost to seduce a female giraffe that was playing hard to get. On the far side of the plain an elephant, shoulder deep in the wetland, nonchalantly munched its way through a seemingly endless supply of reeds. Warthogs wallowed in the muddy shallows, and waterbuck plunged deeper into the marsh in search of their favoured aquatic vegetation. Big buffalo herds kicked up grasshoppers and other tasty insect fare for their entourage of attendant egrets, and an assortment of herons and storks fished for dinner along the water's edge.

This was off-the-beaten-track Africa at its best and our softly spoken guide, Niyibizi Filmin, articulated my feelings eloquently when he whispered, 'On the Kilala Plains you just don't know which way to turn or where to look; there is too much going on in every direction.'

After many enraptured hours, we tore ourselves away and headed for Mutumba Mountain in Akagera's heart. The wildlife thinned out as we left Kilala, but it was by no means scarce. As we drove south, handsome chestnut-coated impala and skittish bushbuck dominated our sightings until we rounded a corner and encountered a herd of stately roan cautiously crossing the road. They nimbly picked their way up the hillside before fading from view. When I gunned the engine to get up the steep rocky road into the hills, oribi and topi bulls took flight at the sound of the growling vehicle.

Located on a grassy ridge and boasting spectacular views to distant Lake Mihindi, the campsite at Mutumba Hills was the perfect place to stop and stretch our legs. The altitude and a refreshing breeze ensured that the place was pleasantly free of the tsetse flies that lurked in the woodlands below. As we drove into the camp under a golden sky, a zebra family and a group of old dagga boys (bachelor buffaloes) loitered nearby. We rummaged through the cooler box and whipped out a couple of cold beers to celebrate 'another *tough* day in Africa'. I swear I saw the old bulls sagely nod their heads in agreement.

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